

Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/124729/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

McGuire, Colin P. 2019. Timing in Bruce Lee's Writings as Inspiration for Listening Musically to Hand Combat and Martial Arts Performance. *Martial Arts Studies* (8) , pp. 73-83. 10.18573/mas.83 file

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18573/mas.83>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.18573/mas.83>>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies.

See

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



CONTRIBUTOR

Colin P. McGuire was until recently an IRC Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Music at University College Cork, Ireland. He holds a PhD in Ethnomusicology and an MA in Electroacoustic Composition from York University, as well as a Graduate Diploma in Asian Studies from the York Centre for Asian Research. His academic work centres on the locus of music and body. He is particularly interested in how being attentive to choreomusical connections between movement and sound can contribute to understandings of being-in-the-world, relationships, values, and beliefs. Currently, McGuire's research focuses on music and martial arts, examining transmission processes, tradition/legacy, body-experience, community/identity, and heroic display. As a composer and sound artist, McGuire has worked with dancers and choreographers like the Little Pear Garden Dance Company and Ballet Creole's Patrick Parson. Under the DJ/producer pseudonym Ronin E-Ville, his eclectic electronic dance music (EDM) has been in the Top 20 of Canada's Earshot radio charts for electronica and has also been licensed to the Gemini Award-winning TV show *Departures*.

TIMING IN BRUCE LEE'S WRITINGS AS INSPIRATION FOR LISTENING MUSICALLY TO HAND COMBAT AND MARTIAL ARTS PERFORMANCE COLIN P. MCGUIRE

DOI

10.18573/mas.83

KEYWORDS

Bruce Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, timing, martial sound, musicking

CITATION

McGuire, Colin P. 2019. 'Timing in Bruce Lee's Writings as Inspiration for Listening Musically to Hand Combat and Martial Arts Performance'. *Martial Arts Studies* 8, 73-83. doi.org/10.18573/mas.83

ABSTRACT

Timing is how we know when to do something in order to achieve an aim, and it is essential to all manner of human endeavour. In his posthumous international bestseller *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* [1975], Bruce Lee discussed timing as a quality of martial arts. His most influential timing concept is broken rhythm, an idea that has resonated with martial artists around the world. Notwithstanding *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*'s impact, the strategies, tactics, and methods of timing remain poorly expressed in hand combat discourse. Lee's own choice of vocabulary was eclectic. It allowed him to discuss diverse approaches to combat time but it also led to inconsistencies that muddy the waters for those wishing to engage with Lee's ideas. This article takes up the question of timing in two ways. First, I re-interpret Bruce Lee's ideas about the rhythm of combat using music theory, which provides precise, self-consistent vocabulary for the task. Second, I explore the meanings that a musical hearing of hand combat reveals at the intersection of sound and movement. Based on extensive fieldwork at a Chinese-Canadian kung fu club, I identify some of the ways that percussion-driven performances of choreographed fighting skills have overlooked value as combat training.

INTRODUCTION

Tao of Jeet Kune Do [Lee 1975] is a book containing the essence of Bruce Lee's ever-evolving approach to martial arts as it stood at the time of his death in 1973. It was published posthumously in 1975 based on Lee's draft manuscript and notes, as well as input from his widow, guidance from his senior students, and the editing of Gil Johnson. The text outlines the philosophy, qualities, tools, and strategies of jeet kune do, which was Lee's Cantonese name for his approach to fighting. The name translates as 'way of the intercepting fist', and I will refer to it henceforth as JKD for convenience. The aim of Lee's text is twofold: 1) to argue for effectiveness and efficiency in hand combat as the ultimate measure of a martial art and 2) to expound on a path of martial self-realization. The book was not intended as a how-to manual. Nonetheless, the text includes fine-grained discussion of some of the technical aspects of JKD.

Tao of Jeet Kune Do provides a rich foundation for thinking about being-in-time through hand combat, which has had a transnational impact on the physical culture of martial arts, especially through Lee's idea of broken rhythm. For example, Duke Roufus is the coach of former UFC champion Anthony Pettis, and, in interviews, he has openly acknowledged Bruce Lee's influence on his approach to striking [see Roufus n.d.]. As an ethnomusicologist and martial artist, I am interested in the musicality of Lee's ideas about timing, particularly the way he uses concepts like rhythm, cadence, and tempo throughout the book.

Unfortunately, there are inconsistencies and gaps in Lee's terminology, which I aim to rectify. My first objective in this article is to listen to the core concepts of timing from JKD in order to propose a self-consistent set of musical terms for talking about the rhythm of combat. In so doing, I am purposefully flipping the idea of culture-as-text by hearing it as music, as proposed by ethnomusicologist Jeff Tilton [1997/2008]. This approach rests on disciplinary conventions in ethnomusicology where music is understood at its broadest to be humanly-organized sound [Blacking 1973] and is studied in/as culture [Merriam 1964]. Given that *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* is ostensibly about knowing oneself through martial arts, there is interpretative power in being able to think, talk, and write more clearly about how people move combatively in time. I am proposing to hear that movement first, rather than trying to read it directly.

By listening to martial arts as a form of what musicologist Christopher Small [1998] calls *musicking*, my broader aim is to clear a path to the meanings found in the embodied musical relationships of hand combat. The concept of musicking brackets ontological questions about what is or is not music, focusing instead on the human processes that organize

sound in culturally-meaningful ways. As musicking, the characteristic timings that martial artists deploy in relation to an opponent can then be described, analysed, and interpreted according to individual, stylistic, and cultural ways of valuing being-in-time.

Whether perceived through the ears, eyes, or bodies, embodied rhythms of attack and defence establish relationships. Inasmuch as martial arts generate a form of humanly-organized sound, listening to hand combat musically facilitates discussion of meaning in choreomusical relationships. With regard to musical meaning, Small suggests that 'the act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies' [Small 1998: 13].

Violence, aggression, and struggle are key relationships when it comes to martial arts. Raw combative movements are systematized to become trained fighting skills, and they thus become part of a culturally-coded discourse on how to manage relationships of violence and aggression. Combative sounds help reveal practitioners' relationships to opponents – physical or imagined – because they highlight how timing in combat determines the result of an encounter. When martial arts are listened to musically, embodied combative relationships can be heard, discussed, interpreted, and analysed in ways similar to the ways that people read cultural expressions as text.

A musical hearing of hand combat is predicated on listening in specialized ways. All forms of hand-to-hand combat involve timing and create distinctive sonic patterns, for which I propose the term *martial sound* as a way of listening to the total soundscape of martial arts. Whether in training, performance, or combat, the audible aspects of martial arts include not only the sounds of attack and defence (with or without weapons), but also stepping, rolling, vocalizing, breathing, and self-accompanying (e.g., slapping one's own body), as well as the noises of equipment, clothing, and/or flooring.

Significantly, patterns of martial sound remain audible rhythms of combat even when they are perceived visually or kinaesthetically. For example, an audience watching a fight in a large arena might not hear much of combatants' martial sound with their ears, but they can still 'listen' visually to the timing. Similarly, combatants can 'listen' to their own movements, feeling the timing in their bodies through proprioception. They can also physically 'hear' an opponent's timing, with each point of contact, pressure, and force in a striking or grappling exchange providing concrete rhythmic information.

In the second part of this article, I engage with Bruce Lee's critique of the potentially calcifying effects of traditional martial arts training in

order to reveal how a musical approach can help create opportunities for rhythmic liberation within tradition. I do so by applying the rhythmic vocabulary I will have established in my discussion of *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*. First, I extract an example from Lee's work on the television show *Longstreet* (1971-1972) wherein he explicitly addresses JKD timing concepts, providing an audiovisual example for readers to consult. This vignette shows how important musicality was to Lee's expression of martial arts. Second, I describe the combative implications of performing choreographed kung fu routines with an ear to martial sound.

Lee was highly critical of 'set patterns, incapable of adaptability, of pliability' [Lee 1975: 15], which aligns with his emphasis on effectiveness in free fighting. Whereas he advocated doing away with choreographed routines altogether, my research consultants at the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club propose that performing set patterns of movement in rhythmically-flexible ways can still offer valuable combat training. Drawing on my long-term fieldwork, I listen musically to kung fu performance through Lee's ideas about timing. In the ethnographic example, I reveal combative utility in choreographed forms that is typically overlooked, including perhaps by the Little Dragon himself.

TIMING IN TAO OF JEET KUNE DO

Bruce Lee's most sustained writing on timing lies in *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*'s 'Qualities' chapter. The book returns to these issues at several points, such as when dealing with feints in the 'Preparations' chapter and throughout the 'Attacking' chapter. The discussion is striking-centric, but an article by Linda Yiannakis [2014] on patterns and timing in judo shows that rhythm is just as applicable to grappling arts. While Lee did not always indicate where he got his terminology from, he appears to have drawn on Western fencing, boxing, chess, and military drill, as well some general music or dance theory, to discuss timing.

Most of the terms in the book are in English; the main exception is the name jeet kune do itself, which encapsulates the central strategy of Bruce Lee's approach to fighting. The Cantonese word *jiht* [截]¹ means to intercept, and it represents a named boxing method [*kyühñ faat*, 拳法] in the wing chun style of kung fu [Wihng Chēun kyühñ, 詠春拳]

1 In order to reflect the linguistic specificity of both Bruce Lee and my fieldwork consultants, I have used Cantonese romanization (Yale system) and traditional characters for all Chinese language inclusions in the text. I do so rather than defaulting to the Mandarin pinyin and simplified characters promoted by the People's Republic of China (PRC) because Cantonese is more germane to the subject matter, but also because I am resisting the hegemonic politics of the PRC's national language.

that was part of Lee's foundation. As the name implies, to *intercept* is to stop, cut off, check, immobilize, interrupt, disperse, or otherwise quell an opponent's movement, which relies on sensitivity to martial sound relationships.

Timing is how one determines when to act in order to achieve an aim, and in hand combat it is in relation to an opponent. Although interception seems to imply that the opponent acts first, and that one must react to his or her timing, JKD privileges *proactivity*. This is not to say that Lee was against reactivity, because he was at pains to make clear that flexibly adapting to circumstances is central to success in combat. Ideally, however, a JKD practitioner would strategically set up opportunities for the controlled reactions of secondary attacks like interceptions or ripostes by proactively inviting, provoking, attracting, and luring an opponent to act [Lee 1975: 162-163]. Controlling the pace and rhythm of a fight provides intuition about when the opponent is going to move before they move. Lee thus emphasized the importance of trying to control the timing of an opponent's movements in both attack and defence, allowing a JKD practitioner's interceptions to achieve maximum effect. JKD's overarching timing method is like a version of a saying that my wing chun teacher taught me, which he attributed to Sun Tzu, purported author of the ancient Chinese military treatise *The Art of War*.² A couplet of four-character idioms sums it up as follows: 'Act first to seize initiative; attack according to timing' [*sīn faat jai yàhn; yān shì yìh gung*, 先發制人 因時而攻]. As articulated by Lee himself:

There is little direct attack in Jeet Kune Do. Practically all offensive action is indirect, coming after a feint or taking the form of countering after an opponent's attack is foiled or spent – it requires agile manoeuvring, feinting and drawing an opponent.
[1975: 161]

HEARING THE RHYTHM OF COMBAT

Broadly speaking, a rhythm is a pattern of duration, whether simple or complex, singular or repeated. The basic unit of duration in hand combat is what Bruce Lee called a *movement-time* [Lee 1975: 60-61], which is the interval required to make a simple motion and which

2 I could not find those idioms in *The Art of War*, but I did find the first part of the couplet in the *Book of the Han* [漢書]: <https://ctext.org/pre-qin-and-han?search=先發制人>.

draws conceptually on the basic temporal unit of Western fencing known as a *temps d'escrime*. For example, launching a punch, taking a step, or launching a punch while taking a step would each be one movement-time. Lee also used the term *beat* when discussing broken rhythm attacks that land on what he called the *half-beat* [Lee 1975: 63], but he did not clarify the precise relationship between beats and movement-time.

If I map them musically, a movement-time forms the basic pulse of hand combat and constitutes beats that can be added together or subdivided in various ways.³ In Western music theory, four beats are a whole note (a.k.a. semi-breve), which would accommodate a fulsome striking combination. A single beat of movement-time is thus a quarter note (a.k.a. crochet), and Lee's half-beat would be an eighth note (a.k.a. quaver). Because a beat is perceived as occurring on the point of impact for a strike and/or the moment when weight is transferred from one foot to the other in a step, there can also be a fractional beat on preparation (known in music as a pickup or anacrusis).⁴

Lee's next idea about timing was termed *cadence*. He defined it as 'speed, regulated to coincide with the adversary's' and qualified it as 'the specific rhythm at which a succession of movements is executed' [Lee 1975: 63]. Used in this way, the concept is similar to the synchrony of military drill, where officers use what is called a *cadence call* to set the speed at which soldiers will march in time together. The term *cadence* is unwieldy for hand combat, however, because it conflates three phenomena: rate of movement-time, pattern of duration, and synchronization with the opponent. Furthermore, Lee used the word later in the text to refer to only one part or other of the complex of factors from his original definition. For precision's sake, I am parsing cadence into three inter-related terms that can be used independently.

First is what musicians call *tempo*, from the Italian word for time. Unfortunately, Lee used the word *tempo* idiosyncratically, which is confusing because of the more widespread use of the word in a musical sense. He called a *tempo* the beat in a cadence with the ideal timing to land an attack, particularly where an opponent is committed to a

movement. This definition seems to come from chess, where a player's turn to make a move is called a *tempo*, although in chess one cannot make a move until the other player has finished. An opponent loses a tempo in chess when one forces them to make a move that they had not planned, as when threatening with check. In hand combat, however, one can attack and steal a tempo while the opponent is still making a move, such as with an interception like a stop-hit, immobilization, or counter-time.

Lee's use of *tempo* is further complicated by the fact that he also used it to refer to timing in a musical way. In music, *tempo* is the underlying rate of musical pulse, which people embody when they tap their feet in time with a tune. In martial sound, a fighter's tempo is their pace or rate of movement-time. Just as in music, combative tempo can – and often does – vary significantly. During a fight, opponents speed up and slow down as they vie to control the pace of attack and defence. Notably, a movement-time can also be shorter or longer based on the subdivision or conglomeration of beats, which does not change the fundamental tempo but does allow a great variety of rhythms. Tempo can even be a weapon, as when a well-conditioned athlete purposefully establishes a rate of movement-time that will tire out the opponent. For consistency's sake, I recommend sticking with a musical idea of tempo.

Second are patterns of movement that create combative rhythms. While the underlying pulse of a fighter's tempo is technically a basic type of continuous rhythm, I am referring more specifically to combinations of attacks, defences, feints, steps, and body movements that adhere together into discrete phrases. Generally speaking, fighters execute their combative rhythms according to the tempo that they are keeping. That is not to say that combinations have to be the same as the underlying beat or that there is only one rhythm for any given combination. In fact, Lee was highly critical of traditional choreographed forms because they can codify the timing of movement patterns, thus placing a limit on rhythmic options. Instead, he proposed that it is more effective for combat to use movement with a variety of rhythms in order to remain adaptable and avoid being predictable.

The third term that I parse out of Lee's idea of cadence is *synchronization* and its obverse, *asynchronization*. In the passage I quoted above, Lee writes about regulating both one's tempo and one's combative rhythm to that of an opponent, i.e. synchronizing with them. Being-in-time together through a shared tempo is so basic to musicianship that musicians often take it for granted and do not need a special word for synchronous performance.

There are, however, musical terms for more complex relationships that rely on being in-time together through adhering to the same tempo

3 The motion of an attack is like the sound envelope of a musical note; the sound/movement actually starts before where we perceive the beat, but the initiation happens so quickly that we are better able to perceive the peak of the sound's amplitude or the point of impact in an attack. In a long, slow feint, however, the start might be more like a pickup that is intended to get a reaction before the actual beat of movement-time.

4 It is possible, for example, to divide a beat in triple rather than duple subdivisions, or to break it into four rather than two.

but playing different rhythms, thus synchronizing rate of pulse while allowing rhythmic freedom. Lee's central concept of broken rhythm is precisely about not attacking on the basic pulse of an established fighting tempo. Instead, he advocated striking between the beats in various ways so as to foil the opponent's defences. Successful defence requires the defender to sync their movement with an incoming attack so that the block, parry, cover, evasion, sprawl, etc., occurs at the same time as the strike, throw, takedown, lock, or choke.⁵ Too early, and the attacker can switch to another level or line. Too late, and the attack will already have been successful before the defender has responded. Lee proposed establishing a timing pattern through a combination of feinting, moving, and stepping, and then using an asynchronous, off-beat, broken rhythm attack while the defender remains momentarily synchronized to the attacker's old tempo and/or rhythm.

There are two primary musical examples of broken rhythm strategies, although these certainly do not exhaust the topic. By striking in time with the established tempo, but off the beat, one can use what is called *syncopation* or emphasizing the off-beats. Lee talked about broken rhythm using a half-beat or a one-and-a-half beat [Lee 1975: 63], whether with or without interjecting a pause [Lee 1975: 192]. Doing so can catch the opponent in between movements when it is not possible for them to respond.

Broken rhythm can also follow the basic pulse of the tempo but change what is called the *phase* of the synchronization. When two identical rhythmic patterns have slightly different tempos, they are out of phase with each other and thus asynchronous. Lee suggested either speeding up or slowing down at the end of an attacking combination in order to break the rhythm by changing the phase relationship of the engagement. The defender successfully synchronizes with the first part of the combo and then remains momentarily locked to the old tempo while the attacker slips out of phase to land the final attack. Subtle acceleration or deceleration changes the phase relationship of two opponents' timing, thus creating asynchronicity that is neither on a main beat of movement-time nor on an even subdivision of the pulse.

Figure 1. Transcription of synchronized rhythm (attack above, defence below)

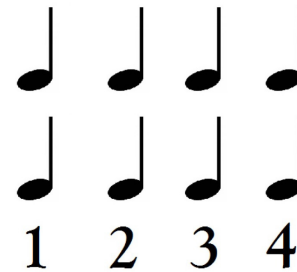


Figure 2. Transcription of syncopated broken-rhythm (attack above, defence below)

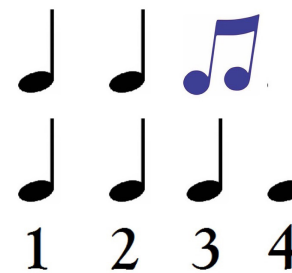


Figure 3. Transcription of phasing broken-rhythm (attack above, defence below)



5 Sometimes the best defence is a good offence, which could entail intercepting an opponent's attack with a stop-hit or reactive takedown, thus getting ahead of the attacker's rhythm to nullify it.

JKD, MUSIC, AND TIMING ON THE SMALL SCREEN

There is a key example in Bruce Lee's on-screen legacy where he expounds on what I call martial sound. It is found in an episode of the television series *Longstreet* (1971-1972) wherein the eponymous main character, Mike Longstreet (James Franciscus), a blind insurance investigator, learns JKD from Li Tsung, an antique dealer played by Bruce Lee. Given the visual disability of the pupil, many of the lessons focus on hearing an opponent's movement and musicking a martial relationship to it. While the screenplay is officially credited to Lee's student, Stirling Silliphant, JKD's creator had a hand in writing the Li Tsung scenes, resulting in him playing himself while promoting his martial art [Polly 2018: 282-286].

In the episode in question, which is appropriately titled 'The Way of the Intercepting Fist', Longstreet asks Li to teach him how to fight, but Li objects, saying that he does not believe in systems or methods. Instead, he claims to have found the cause of his own ignorance; so Longstreet asks for help with the same, which is when Li agrees. When they begin training together, the new student is told to listen to the beat of a diegetic jazz-funk tune as well as to listen simultaneously to his teacher's movements.⁶

As the funky music plays, Li alternates between loosely bouncing in time with the main pulse and explosively either faking or kicking. Listening to the soundtrack reveals that his attacks are primarily syncopated against the beat of the music, as heard through the grunts he attaches to them. Next, Li tells his pupil to start moving, too, coaching him not to move just for the sake of it, but rather to be in a relationship to his 'opponent' through the beat. As Longstreet begins to hear the martial sound, Li encourages him to flow, to open up, and to find the timing for a kick of his own. The student's kick eventually comes on the off-beat of the third pulse in the underlying four-beat metric pattern, earning praise from his teacher.

This lesson in martial sound demonstrates a relationship between movement, patterns, and timing, showing how an attacker can listen for their opportunity to strike. Longstreet cannot see his opponent, so he must hear movement as rhythm. Appropriately, teacher Li is not overly creative in his movement, as compared to Bruce Lee's florid displays in *The Game of Death*, which suits the pedagogical nature of the scene. The regular rhythms of the funky jazz music create a steady pulse to anchor Li's movement and help Longstreet hear patterns. Once the student recognizes a recurring pattern, he is able to time a kick without seeing because he synchronizes his own movement with that of his teacher through the music.

6 The musical score for this episode is credited to noted jazz composer and saxophonist Oliver Nelson (1932-1975): https://youtu.be/wuhQOAgz_Fk?t=855.

While the combative relationship between the two men is mediated by the tune blasting on the stereo, the music merely makes the rhythm of combat easier to grasp. Li/Lee uses music to show the student/audience how an understanding of martial sound allows fighting to be musical and for musicking fighters to establish relationships of attack and defence through rhythm.⁷

TRADITIONAL KUNG FU FORMS AND THE RHYTHM OF COMBAT

Bruce Lee famously disparaged traditional martial arts, or at least those he encountered in Hong Kong and the Western United States during his lifetime, as a 'classical mess' and 'organized despair'. Central to his critique was disdain for the practice of choreographed forms, which he found limiting when compared with the unpredictable realities of hand combat.

Lee's assessment of set routines is now widely upheld by combat sport athletes and combatives experts alike [Bailey 2014]. In JKD, only the most effective fighting concepts and physical tools are acceptable. But that does not mean that forms have no value as combat training. Somewhat ironically, Lee's ideas about timing provide insight into how forms training can be made more useful for learning to fight. Using an ethnographic example, I intend to show that some traditional kung fu stylists use music as martial sound in a way parallel to Lee's lessons in *Longstreet*, providing an often-overlooked combat benefit by training timing through musicking.

The ethnographic part of this article rests on eight years of observant participation [Wacquant 2004] fieldwork at the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club [*Hōng Lohk Mōuhgún*, 康樂武館] in Toronto, Canada's Spadina/Dundas Chinatown. Master Paul Chan [*Chàhn Syuh-yuk Sífú*, 陳樹郁師傅] (1932-2012) and Master Jim Chan [*Chàhn Jan-màhn Sífú*, 陳振文師傅] (1929-2016) founded Hong Luck in 1961, and I had the privilege of learning from them before they passed away. Between 2008 and 2016, I was ostensibly at the club to study the percussion music that practitioners play to accompany not only their lion dancing but also demonstrations of Choi Lee Fut [*Choi Léih Faht*, 蔡李佛] and Do Pi [*Douh Paaí*, 道派] kung fu.⁸

7 It is also worth noting that an account from one of Lee's students shows that JKD training has actually used explicitly musical methods off-screen as well [Nishioka 1998].

8 During my fieldwork, Choi Lee Fut was the main style at Hong Luck, whereas Do Pi used to be more prevalent. In the club's early days, Hung Gar [*Hūnggā Kyūhn*, 洪家拳] was also taught, but now it is a peripheral part of the curriculum.

A large drum is the lead instrument of the ensemble,⁹ and it is one of the last things to be learned in the curriculum. During my ethnographic apprenticeship [Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason 2014], I thus spent a lot of time practising kung fu and lion dancing in order to work my way up to the drum. My fieldwork at Hong Luck was undergirded by 25 years of experience in a range of other martial arts as well as my training in music, which has proven helpful for thinking through the rhythm of combat.

Broadly speaking, kung fu's set routines are complex admixtures of combative, theatrical, and ritual elements [Mroz 2016], and they are central to shaping, maintaining, and expressing group identity for styles, lineages, and schools. Moreover, as an embodiment of Chinese culture, forms performance also serves as a form of soft power [Nye 1990], both enhancing China's stature abroad and (re)connecting diasporic practitioners to their heritage. When theatrical or ritual movement qualities are privileged, it tends to interfere with fighting effectiveness because dramatic exaggeration of technique might look good, but it is rarely helpful in combat.

At Hong Luck, as with many traditional styles of Southern Chinese kung fu, forms are demonstrated with percussion accompaniment, which creates an opportunity for a more combative approach to performance.¹⁰ Despite being one step removed from direct fighting application, musicking a fighting relationship to the drum rhythms can still make for a compelling performance – and also provide valuable combat training. As per Lee's martial sound lesson in *Longstreet*, being able to time one's actions in relation to an opponent's rhythm can be trained using music.

The instructors at the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club taught my classmates and I to perform solo choreographed routines without following the percussion music, thus establishing a combative relationship with the beat.¹¹ As one senior student remarked to me in the summer of 2013,

9 I have compared elsewhere the role of music in performances of kung fu and lion dance, where the former is asynchronous and the latter synchronous [McGuire 2015].

10 Bruce Lee's primary kung fu training was in wing chun kung fu, which is a Southern style that does not traditionally have lion dance and percussion.

11 Technically, the very beginning and ending of a choreographed demonstration are meant to be in time with the percussion when a practitioner does the opening and closing bows. This synchronization enhances the civility of the obeisance, as well as provides a marked contrast with the combative core of the form. Some forms also contain theatrical or ritual interludes that call for synchronization. Nonetheless, the vast majority of a demonstration should ideally be asynchronous with the music.

synchronizing movement with music makes it look like a dance, not martial arts, especially if the performer begins to emphasize aesthetics over fighting application.

However, remaining asynchronous to the loud, insistent rhythms of the drum, gong, and cymbals is actually quite difficult. There is a deeply engrained human tendency to align our bodily movements with what we perceive as music, a phenomenon known as *entrainment* [Clayton, Sager, and Will 2004; Phillips-Silver, Aktipis, and Bryant 2010]. A simple example is the way people unconsciously tap their feet or bob their heads to the beat of a catchy tune. Overcoming the pull of musical entrainment makes kung fu forms demonstrations more combative by demonstrating a martial relationship to the sound of the percussion ensemble. The performance becomes credible as a demonstration of martial arts through interactivity [Mroz 2016], which in the case of a solo choreographed form must be evoked through interacting with an imagined partner. In essence, the music stands in for an opponent. Remaining asynchronous to the music embodies the strategy of using elusive combat rhythms that make one's movements unpredictable for an adversary.¹²

RHYTHM IN COMBAT PERFORMANCE

Within a multigenerational, multicultural kung fu club like Hong Luck, there is naturally a wide range of ability, but the different ways that people engage with rhythm during forms demonstration are also a function of their approach to martial sound. Ideally, every Hong Luck member would not only practice basic techniques and solo choreographed forms, but also engage in free sparring and lion dancing, as well as be able to play all the instruments in the percussion ensemble. In practice, however, limitations of time, interest, and ability tend to limit how many elements of the curriculum a practitioner will focus on. According to Master Jim Chan, the best forms demonstrations draw on real fighting skills to showcase realistic power, speed, and timing (in a highly performative mode), but relatively few people live up to his standards. The rare performances that embody his ideals are those with a markedly combative character, bringing knowledge and ability from sparring into a demonstration. Furthermore, an acute sensitivity to martial sound developed through lion dance and drumming is also one of the hallmarks of a good performance.

During regular training inside the club, practitioners learn and practice forms without music, meaning it is a relatively unfamiliar situation

12 Asynchronous relationships between movement and music are also found in the choreographed forms demonstrations of other martial arts, such as some styles of Indonesian pencak silat [Mason 2016].

when they demonstrate forms with music. Nonetheless, teachers typically count out loud during class to organize group training of solo forms (also for basic technique drills), which entails a certain level of synchronization. Beginners receive one verbal count for each movement, but eventually the teacher only cues the beginning of each fighting combination, allowing students to set their own pace within the phrases of movement that are strung together to make a form.

Students are encouraged to practice alone, too, in order to explore their own rhythmic interpretations of the choreography. Public demonstrations are the only time that the traditional percussion music accompanies kung fu forms, which for most Hong Luck members only occurs once a year. The club's anniversary is celebrated annually in August, including a banquet with lion dancing and kung fu demonstrations. There are typically a few dress rehearsals leading up to the anniversary, where performers get to try doing their forms while the percussion ensemble plays. Still, performing kung fu while remaining asynchronous to the beats is an uncommon experience, contributing to a heightened sensory state during demonstrations.

In addition to nerves from being on stage in front of hundreds of people at the anniversary banquet, the thunderous percussion elicits a rush of energy that performers must learn to control, lest they be overwhelmed by it. Performance and combat are different, but the adrenaline rush of a fight-or-flight response does not discriminate between them, so being able to deliver martial arts techniques under emotional, psychological, and hormonal duress is a valuable competency to develop.

Try as they might, many people cannot overcome the pull of the beat, becoming entrained to it despite their efforts to ignore it. This problem is not restricted to new students, and some more senior members still end up entraining to the percussion during demonstrations. When I asked practitioners, junior and senior, what they were experiencing in performances where they became entrained, they often said that they were not really aware of the percussion or that they were actively ignoring it. Unfortunately for them, the percussion could still exert an influence on their bodily movements, showing that one does not need to be conscious of rhythm to be subject to its power. In hand combat, JKD timing concepts are predicated on calculating, regulating, and directing an opponent's rhythm before applying a broken rhythm attack or counter. In order to break a rhythm, one needs to be able to find, make, and/or control a rhythm first. The ability to resist an opponent's entrainment is thus an important defensive competence, and a good kung fu demonstration with music cultivates that ability.

Some Hong Luck practitioners develop more refined rhythmic sensibilities in their forms. During my fieldwork, the most notable

example was a senior student named David Lieu [*Láuh Gā-wáih*, 柳嘉偉], who was my lion dance teacher, the top drummer at the club, and a regular participant in the sparring class. Before his death in 2016, Master Jim also confirmed that my own demonstrations were achieving the mark, even going as far as telling me that my kung fu was becoming the same as his teacher's. In discussion with David, we agreed that the percussion was part of our awareness during performances, as compared to those who said that they were ignoring it. In my experience, the key is to keep the music on the horizon of my perception, but to focus on maintaining my own tempo and rhythms in the foreground.

David and I are better able to avoid entrainment because we can split our attention to encompass the percussion, granting it enough space in the periphery of perception to avoid it subconsciously entraining us and also allowing us to interact with the beats in the flow of performance. The resulting martial sound relationships phase and syncopate rather than synchronize, creating a rhythmic counterpoint that looks (and feels) more like fighting than dancing. It is in this loosely coupled choreomusical relationship that broken rhythm thrives and the boundaries between performance and combat training blur.

Hong Luck's mandate is to preserve and promote Chinese culture in diaspora, as well as teach fighting skills for self-defence, and these two goals are mutually reinforcing for practitioners who engage with the club's full curriculum. It would be antithetical to that mission to take a JKD approach and jettison the less combative practices, but it would be just as bad to let performance practice outshine fighting skill. When I asked the club's sparring coach, Adrian Balca, about the value of forms, lion dancing, and percussion for combat training, he suggested that it is a question of focus [personal communication, 3 Dec. 2012]. In his experience, practitioners can develop their sense of timing, rhythm, synchronization, tempo, etc. by training in dance, music, and performance, but they still need to work at applying those competences in free sparring. Adrian has participated in all aspects of Hong Luck's practices, and he claims to continue benefitting from that training, even though he now chooses to focus on fighting applications. As a Canadian national Chinese kickboxing [*sáandá*, 散打] gold medalist, Adrian has demonstrated practical abilities that support his insights. An approach like his reinvests the value of the club's culturally-oriented performance practice to draw dividends for sparring.

BROKEN RHYTHM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

Timing in martial arts is not only a matter of combat effectiveness, because it also embodies culture. As something of an iconoclast, Bruce Lee sought to liberate himself from tradition, stripping JKD down to the 'suchness' of combat. Nonetheless, perspective plays an important role in how martial timing is interpreted. Case in point, Hong Luck's Master Paul Chan taught me that broken rhythm is an integral part of performing kung fu in not only a combative way, but also a culturally acceptable one. In the winter of 2009, he took me aside during a training session to scold me for not doing my forms in a manner that looked Chinese to him, saying that I was strong but rigid and that, despite my European-Canadian heritage, my movement looked Japanese. Master Paul then gave me tips on how to finish my combinations with more rhythmic nuance, although it was several years before I was able to apply the lesson. By 2014, I was employing broken rhythm more consistently in my forms, but by then Master Paul had passed away. Nonetheless, one of Master Paul's closest students (who is now the club's head instructor) intersubjectively confirmed my self-evaluation when he commented that the way I was finishing my combinations was looking Chinese.

I had gradually come to hear how there was meant to be a fluid breaking of rhythm at the end of a sequence, lingering mid-strike before gathering force and accelerating into the final impact.¹³ The resulting broken rhythm is relative to the tempo established by the initial movements of the sequence, meaning it does not need musical accompaniment to be apparent. The choreomusical relationship can take several forms: a micro-change of tempo that shifts the phase of the last beat, a slightly longer hesitation onto an off-beat that creates syncopation, or even a return to tempo for an emphatic on-beat shot that is surprising because of the contraction and expansion of movement-time that precedes it. Within a rehearsed pattern of movement, broken rhythm creates opportunities to adapt one's striking at the last second, which creates aesthetically-pleasing variation in performance and promotes combatively effective ability to vary timing in an attack. While the movements of a form might be pre-determined, their timing is not.

The spatiotemporal phenomenon I am describing has cultural implications that extend beyond broken rhythm in martial arts. Dance scholar Yatin Lin [2010] has observed the same subtle gathering of force and temporal distortion driving toward an emphatic completion

in choreography by Taiwan's Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, as well as in Chinese calligraphy. When I studied calligraphy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2012, I observed first-hand how the teacher's brushwork used the same easing, gathering, and accelerating in order to write each part of a character and often with an exaggeration on the final stroke. Lin suggests that the quality of these gestures references an embodied cultural heritage that is apparent to sensitive audiences.

When the spatiotemporal qualities of this type of gesture are mapped onto music-accompanied martial arts or dance, the rhythmic features become more obvious relative to an audible tempo. Informed audiences are able to decipher meaning from the quality of the spatiotemporal gesture, which they understand as the embodiment of a Chinese way of being-in-space/-time [Mroz 2016]. I do not mean to imply that broken rhythm is exclusive to Chinese culture, but rather that in certain contexts and applications it is appreciated for its Chinese-ness.

CONCLUSION

Bruce Lee's *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* is unequivocally devoted to achieving maximum efficiency in hand combat, with timing as a central quality of effective martial arts. In this article, I have parsed Lee's ideas about timing to propose a musical framework for discussing the movement-time of martial arts through beats, tempo, rhythm, and synchronization – or lack thereof. JKD eschews the 'organized despair' of traditional choreographed forms because of how they condition pre-determined patterns. My ethnography of the Hong Luck Kung Fu club, however, shows that there are potential combative benefits for practitioners who can demonstrate choreographed forms with a flexible application of rhythm and timing relative to accompanying music. Moreover, learning lion dance and percussion in a kung fu club setting builds transferable rhythm skills that can be applied combatively [McGuire 2010].

Knowing that Bruce Lee was a cha-cha champion in Hong Kong, I cannot help but think his ideas about timing and remarkable control of rhythm have benefited from dance training, too.¹⁴ I am not suggesting that traditional kung fu forms, lion dancing, and percussion music will, in and of themselves, make someone a great fighter. Instead, I would like to point out that cross-training with martial sound can be helpful for improving rhythm and timing – even within the tightly-focused goals of JKD.

¹³ For a clear illustration of broken rhythm at the end of combinations in kung fu forms, see Choy Lee Fut master Wong Zen-yum [Wöhng Jan-yām Sifú, 黃振欽師傅]: <https://youtu.be/2wH643oYW0s>.

¹⁴ Former UFC champion Anderson Silva, who is noted for his timing, also has a background in dance (he also happens to be a massive Bruce Lee fan [<https://youtu.be/pWTcAlnm9xQJ>]: <http://fightland.vice.com/blog/anderson-silva-on-racism-homosexuality-police-brutality-and-ballet>).

I am concerned to make clear that I intend the concept of martial sound as a discursive and analytical tool, and that reaping the benefits of combative musicking in performance or fighting relies on cultivated body-feel, not rational cogitation. Thinking musically about hand combat is more suited to teaching, learning, and analyzing martial arts than it is to real-time fighting application; there is little room for thinking in a fight, or, as Bruce Lee might say, 'don't think, feeeeeeel'. When rhythm strategies are understood, they can be used to maximize the benefits of training and to formulate tactics, but then timing needs to become a martial way of being-in-time that creates and seizes opportunities, not a process of intellection. Just as musicians learn theory but play music, martial artists must learn strategy but fight fights. Furthermore, although effective control of timing is important for all martial arts and combat sports, it is neither an unstoppable technique nor the be-all end-all of fighting. Several of my kung fu teachers have been fond of the expression 'first is courage, second is force, third is skill' [*yāt dáam, yih líhk, sāam gūngfū*, 一膽二力三功夫], meaning that without killer instinct and physical power, skill is less useful. Nonetheless, good timing is valuable – assuming one has the guts, speed, and strength to make it work.

There is more to be said about a musical hearing of Lee's timing concepts, and of the rhythm of combat in general, which I hope will inspire other scholars and practitioners to join the conversation. To that end, the martial sound theory I espouse is intended to be applicable to considerations of fighting effectiveness, combative performance, and cultural coherence in any style of hand combat. Martial arts styles that feature musical accompaniment are the most obvious examples, and other scholars have taken note of the choreomusical relationships between movement and music. For example, practitioners of Brazilian capoeira emphasize synchronous relationships between opposing players through musical accompaniment, which provides a forum for displays of *malícia* or cunning [Downey 2005; Diaz 2017] and adept control of broken rhythm. Within a tempo and rhythmic framework set by the musicians, capoeiristas seek to deceive, subvert, and unbalance their opponents; the prettiest hit is the one that is in-time but undefendable.

Martial arts without musical accompaniment are less obviously musicking, but no less productive of martial sound. In the future, I envision scholars working with video footage of combat sports to do more detailed analysis of martial sound timing. By adding sound effects to the fighters' movements using film post-production techniques, one could make the rhythm of combat more audible and thus more obvious. Doing so would allow engagement with questions of the advantages or disadvantages of different timing relationships between opponents, as well as how personal, stylistic, and/or cultural modes

of negotiating timing are manifested in competition. Bruce Lee's JKD provides a conceptual starting point for such discussion, and the musical terminology I have advanced in this article offers coherent vocabulary for the task. At the risk of a finger pointing at the moon being mistaken for all the heavenly glory, I am drawing attention to being-in-time as a central organizing feature of martial arts, whether in training, in street-fighting, in a ring, in a cage, on stage, or in film.

REFERENCES

- Bailey, Richard. 2014. 'How Do Fighters Learn How to Fight: An Insiders' Critique of Traditional Martial Arts Pedagogy'. *Fighting: Intellectualising Combat Sports*. Edited by Keith Gilbert. Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing, 49-57.
- Blacking, John. 1973. *How Musical is Man?* Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Clayton, Martin, Rebecca Sager, and Udo Will. 2004. 'In Time with the Music: The Concept of Entrainment and its Significance for Ethnomusicology'. *European Meetings in Ethnomusicology* 11, 3-75. Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/2661/1/InTimeWithTheMusic.pdf>.
- Diaz, Juan Diego. 2017. 'Between Repetition and Variation: A Musical Performance of *Malicia* in Capoeira'. *Ethnomusicology Forum* 26.1, 46-68. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17411912.2017.1309297>
doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2017.1309297
- Downey, Greg. 2005. *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Downey, Greg, Monica Dalidowicz, and Paul H. Mason. 2014. 'Apprenticeship as Method: Embodied Learning in Ethnographic Practice'. *Qualitative Research* 15.2, 183-200. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1468794114543400>
doi.org/10.1177/1468794114543400
- Lee, Bruce. 1975. *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*. Santa Clarita, CA: Ohara.
- Lin, Yatin. 2010. 'Choreographing a Flexible Taiwan: Cloud Gate Dance Theatre and Taiwan's Changing Identity'. *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*. Edited by Alexandra Carter and Janet O'Shea. London: Routledge, 2250-2260.
- Mason, Paul. 2016. 'Silek Minang in West Sumatra, Indonesia'. *The Fighting Art of Pencak Silat and Its Music: From Southeast Asian Village to Global Movement*. Edited by Uwe Paetzold and Paul H. Mason. Leiden, NL: Koninklijke Brill NV, 205-234.
- McGuire, Colin. 2010. 'Rhythm Skills Development in Chinese Martial Arts'. *The International Journal of Sport and Society* 1.3, 209-218. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/5329767/Rhythm_Skills_Development_in_Chinese_Martial_Arts
doi.org/10.18848/2152-7857/CGP/v01i03/54024
- McGuire, Colin. 2015 'The Rhythm of Combat: Understanding the Role of Music in Performances of Traditional Chinese Martial Arts and Lion Dance'. *MUSICultures* 42.1, 1-23. <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MC/article/view/24252>.
- Merriam, Alan P. 1964. *The Anthropology of Music*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Mroz, Daniel. 2016. 'Taolu: Credibility and Decipherability in the Practice of Chinese Martial Movement'. *Martial Arts Studies* 3, 38-49. doi.org/10.18573/j.2017.10094
- Nishioka, Hayward. 1998. 'Learning Rhythm with Bruce Lee'. *Black Belt* 18. Available at: <https://books.google.ca/books?id=E9kDAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA18&lpg>.
- Nye, Joseph S., Jr. 1990. 'Soft Power'. *Foreign Policy* 80, 153-171. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1148580>
doi.org/10.2307/1148580
- Phillips-Silver, Jessica, C. Athena Aktipis, and Gregory A. Bryant. 2010. 'The Ecology of Entrainment: Foundations of Coordinated Rhythmic Movement'. *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 28.10, 3-14. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21776183>. PMID:21776183 PMCID:PMC3137907
doi.org/10.1525/mp.2010.28.1.3
- Polly, Matthew. 2018. *Bruce Lee: A Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Roufus, Duke. N.d. 'Gyms Around the World: Roufusport Mixed Martial Arts Academy'. *Evolve MMA*. Available at: <https://evolve-mma.com/blog/gyms-around-world-roufusport-mixed-martial-arts-academy/>.
- Small, Christopher. 1998. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Titon, Jeff Todd. 1997/2008. 'Knowing Fieldwork'. *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*. Edited by Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 25-41.
- Yiannakis, Linda. 2014. 'Rhythm, Patterns, and Timing in Martial Arts as Exemplified Through Judo'. *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* 23. Available at: <http://www.journalofasianmartialarts.com/product/japan/judo-jujutsu/rhythm,-patterns,-and-timing-in-martial-arts-as-exemplified-through-judo-detail-488>.
- Wacquant, Loïc. 2004. *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Martial Arts Studies is an open access journal, which means that all content is available without charge to the user or his/her institution. You are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles in this journal without asking prior permission from either the publisher or the author.

The journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Original copyright remains with the contributing author and a citation should be made when the article is quoted, used or referred to in another work.



Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

Martial Arts Studies is an imprint of Cardiff University Press, an innovative open-access publisher of academic research, where 'open-access' means free for both readers and writers.
cardiffuniversitypress.org

Journal DOI

10.18573/ISSN.2057-5696

Issue DOI

10.18573/mas.i8

Accepted for publication 30 June 2019

Martial Arts Studies

Journal design by Hugh Griffiths

MARTIALARTSSTUDIES.ORG

TWITTER.COM/MASTUDIES

MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

EDITORS

Paul Bowman
Benjamin N. Judkins

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS

Kyle Barrowman
Qays Stetkevych

To discuss publication or to submit
a paper please contact:

martial.arts.studies@gmail.com

EDITORIAL ADVISORY PANEL

Oleg Benesch *University of York*
Stephen Chan *SOAS*
Greg Downey *Macquarie University*
D.S. Farrer *University of Guam*
Adam Frank *University of Central Arkansas*
Thomas A. Green *Texas A&M University*
T. J. Hinrichs *Cornell University*
Leon Hunt *Brunel University London*
Felipe P. Jocano Jr *University of the Philippines*
Gina Marchetti *Hong Kong University*
Meaghan Morris *The University of Sydney*
Daniel Mroz *University of Ottawa*
Meir Shahar *Tel Aviv University*
Dale Spencer *Carleton University*
Douglas Wile *Alverno College*
Phillip Zarrilli *Exeter University, Emeritus*